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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MUSCAT 000741

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: SECOND DEMONSTRATION LEADS TO ARRESTS

REF: MUSCAT 716

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) A May 3 protest march that turned into a sit-in at a mosque was allegedly forcibly dispersed by police, reportedly leading to numerous arrests. First-hand accounts cite the number of protesters between 200-500, while other unconfirmed sources claim the numbers were closer to a thousand or more. The demonstrators were calling for a pardon for 30 defendants sentenced on May 2 after being charged with belonging to an illegal organization and seeking to overthrow the government (a thirty-first defendant was found not guilty). Internet message board contributors are calling for more demonstrations "throughout Oman" after evening prayers on Thursday, May 5, and after noon prayers on Friday, May 6, as well as for a motor procession through Muscat on May 6. (Note: The call for the Friday demonstration and car procession were subsequently deleted from the message boards. End note.) Separately, the Foreign Ministry thanked the Ambassador for his statement to a local newspaper that praised the transparency of the defendants' trial while also expressing USG support for religious freedom, the right of association, and endorsing monitoring by human rights organizations. End summary.

VERDICTS SPARK SECOND PROTEST

2. (SBU) On May 2, the State Security Court announced guilty verdicts for 30 defendants charged with belonging to an illegal organization and plotting to overthrow the government (reftel). (Note: A thirty-first defendant was found not guilty.) In reaction to the verdicts and sentences, several hundred protesters gathered at the Said bin Taymur Mosque after evening prayers on May 3. The protest march, taking a slightly different route than the procession on May 1, ran into a police barricade a short distance away (near the Radisson Hotel) that prohibited them from proceeding any further. Ordered to disperse, many protesters returned to the mosque.

3. (SBU) According to unconfirmed reports from sources at the scene, the situation deteriorated when protesters in the mosque engaged in civil disobedience by holding a sit-in. One shaykh continued to stir up protesters outside as he used a loud microphone to call for the Sultan's pardon of the defendants. According to sources, police and some of the more moderate protesters attempted to defuse the situation by asking the protesters to come out. When the demonstrators refused, police allegedly forcibly entered the mosque, striking some protesters (possibly including minors), and arrested over 200 demonstrators in the process. Other sources, however, put the number of those arrested at less than 20, and denied all reports of any violence, by protesters or police. Regional satellite news channel Al-Arabiya aired a report of the incident from their Omani correspondent on the scene who claimed that he himself had been struck by the police. We have been unable to confirm independently, however, the number of persons who may have been detained by police, or precisely what methods the police may have used to quell the protest.

MORE PROTESTS TO COME?

4. (U) Contributors to the on-line message board Al-Sablah have alluded to further demonstrations. They are calling for protests to take place in other towns throughout the Sultanate following maghreb (evening) prayers on Thursday, May 5, for nationwide protests after noon prayers on Friday, May 6, and for a motor procession in Muscat following noon prayers, also on Friday. (Note: The calls for Friday protests were subsequently removed from chatrooms. End note.)

FOREIGN MINISTRY APPRECIATES AMBASSADOR'S STATEMENT

5. (SBU) In a May 4 meeting with visiting NEA/PI Director

Alina Romanowski, MFA Under Secretary Sayyid Badr al-Busaidi underscored his happiness with the transparent and open manner with which the Omani government treated the high-profile trial of the 31 defendants. "Publicizing trials is a new thing for us. We are demonstrating that the law applies to everyone." He thanked the Ambassador for his recent statement quoted in a special supplement to the May 3 edition of the English-language daily Times of Oman focusing on the trial.

16. (U) The full text of the Ambassador's statement is as follows:

(Begin text)

The Embassy of the United States is following with interest the case of the Omani citizens being tried in connection with the charges of belonging to an illegal organization and allegedly plotting to overthrow the government. We applaud efforts by the Omani government to make public substantial portions of the trial and the case against the accused. We believe such openness and transparency can reassure the public and foreign visitors alike that Oman respects the rule of law, including the rights enshrined in Chapter 3 of the Basic Law. Permitting the monitoring of these cases by national and international legal and human rights organizations is another effective way of ensuring a fair and transparent process. The government of the United States firmly believes in religious freedom, freedom of conscience and the right of association. Such rights should never be abused, however, by persons seeking to violate legitimate rights of others by resorting to violence or the threat of violence.

(End text.)

(Note: The British and German ambassadors issued, independently, similar statements. End note.)

Comment

17. (SBU) While nation-wide protests are unlikely, there could be localized manifestations in support of the jailed activists, particularly among the Ibadhi community. Despite reports of possible police force being used at the May 3 demonstration, we are pleased not only that the Times of Oman printed the Ambassador's statement calling for respect for freedom of religion and association, but that it was subsequently lauded by Sayyid Badr. It is important to stress that both demonstrations have been peaceful, orderly, and closely managed by the police, and that there has been no evidence of outside influence or anti-American sentiment.
BALTIMORE